

CASIMIR PULASKI

This section is divided into three parts:

- a brief biography of Casimir Pulaski
- an account of his recent honorary citizenship
- a history of the Casimir Pulaski holiday on the national and state levels

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CASIMIR PULASKI

Born into the gentry class in Warka, Poland, about March 4th, 1747, Casimir Pulaski honed his military skills through long and vigorous resistance to the foreign usurpers of his native land. Ultimately, the valiant Pole was no match against Poland's greedy neighbors, Prussia, Russia and Austria, whose meddling resulted in the partition of that troubled land. Pulaski's property was confiscated, his rank was degraded, and he was declared an outlaw by the Russian faction in Poland.

Pulaski tried to expose Poland's King Stanislaus Poniatowski as a puppet of the Russians in order to rally his countrymen against foreign encroachment. However, the Polish count was condemned to death—accused, without merit, of attempting to assassinate his nation's last king. After a final, bloody and unsuccessful engagement with the Russians, Pulaski went into exile for five years. He fled to Turkey, with the hope of engaging that country's support for his fallen nation. When that proved impossible, due to the cessation of hostilities between the Turks and Russians, the Polish patriot went to France.

After a short stay in a debtors' prison there, Pulaski decided to cast his fate with the American revolutionaries. He landed at Marblehead, Mass., on July 23rd, 1777. After acquitting himself well as a volunteer at the battle at Brandywine on Sept. 11, 1777, General Washington conferred the rank of Brigadier General upon the Pole. Later that winter, Pulaski compiled the first set of regulations for the cavalry, earning him the title "**Father of the American Cavalry**". He again proved himself against the British at Haddonfield, near Camden, N.J., but was dissatisfied with conditions in the cavalry. The general faced not only a shortage of men and horses, but also dissension in the ranks—some subordinate officers chafed at taking orders from a foreigner. Not wishing to be a source of discord, Pulaski resigned his commission as commander of the cavalry.

Despite that setback, this ardent defender of the American cause soon presented a new plan to Washington: an independent legion consisting of 68 cavalymen and 200 infantry that would allow Pulaski to be of greater service to the fledgling American nation. Washington accepted the idea and recommended it to Congress, which sanctioned it in March, 1778. Known as the Pulaski Legion, the corps was one of the few detachments of the Revolutionary Army that was predominantly foreign in its composition. Its

history is also one of the bloodiest of the American Revolution. The Legion's banner inspired the poem, *Hymn of the Moravian Nuns*, written by the famous American poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, in 1825. That poem was set to music, ca. 1850, and is in the Polish Museum of America's sheet music collection.

At Egg Harbor, N.J., Brigadier General Pulaski surprised the British in mid-October 1778, but not before 30 Legionnaires were killed. The citizens of Charleston were about to capitulate to the British in mid-May 1779 when the commander and his Legion arrived in the nick of time to undo that sentiment. During the siege of Savannah, the intrepid Pole rushed to the aid of French troops; in so doing he was wounded in the upper right thigh by grape shot. The stricken soldier was given the best medical attention, but he died two days later, on October 11, 1779, aboard the vessel *Wasp*.

Paul Bentalou, a captain in the Pulaski Legion, and a friend of the general, stated in his short volume, *Pulaski Vindicated from an Unsupported Charge* (1824), that the officer attending Pulaski was compelled "to consign (*his corpse*) to a watery grave" (Bentalou's work is in the Polish Museum of America collection). However, there have been long-standing rumors about Pulaski's remains. One source speculates that they lay under a large oak tree on St. Helena's Island in neighboring South Carolina; the other, that the wounded hero was taken to Greenwich Plantation near Savannah, where he died and was buried. According to the latter theory, at the time when the citizens of Savannah erected a 55-foot monument at Monterey Square in 1853 to honor Pulaski, examiners of the bones at Greenwich Plantation pronounced them similar to a man the same age and height of the general. Those remains were then interred under that monument.

When the Savannah memorial underwent renovations in the fall of 1996, the Pulaski DNA Investigation Committee exhumed the grave there. They extracted DNA from the remains and compared it with that from members of the Pulaski family buried in Europe. Supporters of the claim that Pulaski's body lay in Monterey Square point out that skeletal injuries were similar to wounds the general incurred. Results of the DNA testing conducted in June, 2005 were inconclusive, because of water damage to the remains. In light of that finding, Pulaski's final resting place will likely always remain a matter of conjecture. Nevertheless, on October 9, 2005, the 226th anniversary of the Siege of Savannah, that city organized special funeral services and a final re-interment ceremony at Monterey Square to honor this brave soldier.

HONORARY U. S. CITIZENSHIP FOR GENERAL CASIMIR PULASKI

The movement to grant Casimir Pulaski honorary citizenship in light of the vital contribution he made to the American Revolution apparently began with a 2002 resolution by Mat Lobas, former National Commander of the Polish Legion of American Veterans. A few years later, members of Congress

vowed to take a step forward in this direction in speeches delivered at the Pulaski Day observance at the Polish Museum of America. A bill introduced by Ohio Rep. Dennis Kucinich in the U.S. House of Representatives followed in June, 2005, while Ill. Senator Richard Durbin did likewise in the Senate, in August, 2005. However, the bills were never voted on and died. In March, 2007, Kucinich and Durbin reintroduced the resolutions, but that legislation also failed. Both officials made another attempt in March, 2009. during the 111th Congress.

Those bills passed--in the House on Oct. 8, 2009, and in the Senate on Oct. 22, 2009. President Barack Obama signed the legislation on Nov. 6, 2009, in the Oval Office with no fanfare. With that stroke of the pen, the resolution became Public Law 111-94. Through the time leading up to the presidential signing, the legislation had gained strong, steady support, primarily from Polish-American organizations and media. The news of this proposed legislation was also broadcast abroad by Polish Public Radio.

A non-U.S. citizen of exceptional merit may be declared an Honorary Citizen of the United States by an Act of Congress, or by a proclamation issued by the President of the United States pursuant to authorization granted by Congress. With passage of this bill, Brigadier General Casimir Pulaski became only the seventh person (and the fifth posthumously) in the history of the United States to be so honored. On October 14, 1962, in Buffalo, New York, President Kennedy made this observation at that city's Pulaski Day Parade: "One hundred eighty-three years ago this month, General Pulaski died. He was only 32....He represented a different culture, a different language, a different way of life. But he had the same love of liberty as the people of this country, and therefore, he was an American as much as he was a Pole". We can now say, 47 years after President Kennedy's speech, that Casimir Pulaski truly is an American patriot. Kennedy's speech is in the recorded sound collection of the Polish Museum of America.

HISTORY OF THE CASIMIR PULASKI DAY HOLIDAY

National Observance

The crusade to proclaim a "Casimir Pulaski Day" began in 1929 with the 150th anniversary of the death of this fearless champion of American independence. Playing a pivotal role in this respect was Ignatius Werwinski of South Bend, Indiana. Werwinski, an early benefactor The Polish Museum of America, wrote prolifically to federal, state and local officials across the U.S., requesting that they commemorate this hero of two continents. On June 26th, 1929, President Herbert Hoover proclaimed the first General Pulaski Memorial Day in the U.S. Since then (except 1930), every U.S. president, by official proclamation, has declared October 11th General Pulaski Memorial Day, in order to honor both this icon of American liberty, and the heritage of Polish-Americans.

State of Illinois Observance

The Polish Museum of America has been the official site for the observance of Casimir Pulaski Day in the state of Illinois since 1987. It's an event well-attended by the public, as well as by dignitaries on the local, state and national level. Casimir Pulaski Day is celebrated every year on the first Monday in March. On September 13, 1977, the 80th Illinois General Assembly officially established the first Monday in March (close to Pulaski's birthday) as Casimir Pulaski Day--but not a state holiday--in the State of Illinois. Illinois Governor at the time Daniel Walker signed this statute into law two days later at the Polish Museum of America. On March 3, 1986, in a formal declaration at the State of Illinois Building, then Governor James Thompson designated the first Monday in March as a state holiday in honor of this Revolutionary War hero. The highlight of this annual ceremony is the laying of a floral wreath by dignitaries before the massive oil painting *Pulaski at Savannah*, painted by Stanislaw Batowski in 1933.

Observance in Other States

Each October, Grand Rapids, Michigan celebrates Pulaski Days. Kentucky, has by law, recognized "General Pulaski's Day" for over a half-century. New York City has held an annual Pulaski Day Parade since 1937. It is observed on the first Sunday of October, along New York's famous Fifth Avenue. Milwaukee, Wisconsin also holds an annual parade in honor of this hero of the American Revolution. Additionally, Wisconsin and Indiana have enacted state recognition of this holiday. The legacy of this great proponent of American independence is also celebrated in other areas where large populations of Polish-Americans exist.